27 Apr 2021

Stress in the workplace

Learn how to identify the signs of stress, address stress at work, and distinguish between stress and pressure.

Introduction

Stress can place immense demands on employees' physical and mental health and affect their behaviour, performance and relationships with colleagues. It's a major cause of long-term absence from work, and knowing how to manage the factors that can cause work-related stress is key to managing people effectively. Employers should conduct stress risk assessments and manage workplace activities to reduce the likelihood of stress developing.

This factsheet defines stress and draws the distinction between stress and pressure. It offers information on UK employers' duties under health and safety law and concludes with guidance on how to deal with stress at work, providing information on prevention, early intervention and stress policies.

What is work-related stress?

The UK Health and Safety Executive (HSE) defines work-related stress as: 'The adverse reaction people have to excessive pressures or other types of demand placed on them at work'. People can become stressed when they feel they don't have the resources they need (whether physical, financial or emotional) to cope with these demands.

It's well recognised that excessive or sustained work pressure can lead to stress. Occupational stress poses a risk to businesses and can result in higher sickness absence, lower staff engagement and reduced productivity. According to the HSE, 17.9 million working days were lost to stress, anxiety or depression in 2019/20.

If people feel under too much stress and for too long, mental and physical illness may develop. Acas' advice says 'Stress can affect people mentally in the form of anxiety and depression, and physically in the form of heart disease, back pain and alcohol and drug

dependency'. Find out more about <u>workplace mental health</u>.

Our 2021 <u>Health and wellbeing at work survey report</u>, in partnership with Simplyhealth, shows that stress continues to be one of the main causes of short and long-term absence. Overall, nearly four-fifths of respondents report some stress-related absence in their organisation over the last year. Positively, more employers are recognising stress as an issue, and taking steps to tackle stress within their organisations. However, just half of people professionals who report that their organisation is taking steps to address work-related say its efforts are effective.

Many workplace initiatives can help people to manage stress, whatever the cause. Stress in an employee's personal life, for example due to financial worries, loss of a loved one or a change in circumstances, can understandably influence performance at work because people don't necessarily leave their worries at home. This means employers and managers treating people as individuals and helping them to balance their work and personal responsibilities. Ultimately, building employee resilience and supporting staff experiencing stress can help retain a valued employee and enable them to perform at their best in the long-term. Our 2021 <u>Employee resilience evidence review</u> shows that key factors such as supportive co-workers and managers can help to protect people's resilience.

Pressure and stress

There is sometimes confusion between the terms 'pressure' and 'stress'. It's healthy and essential that people experience challenges within their lives that cause levels of pressure, for example the need to make decisions quickly when faced with a dangerous situation. And up to a certain point, an increase in pressure can improve performance, such as feeling motivated to meet a deadline. However, if pressure becomes excessive, and/or continues for an extended period of time, it can become harmful to health. It's also important to remember that every individual is different and their experience of pressure, and when that can tip into stress, will vary.

Our 2021 Health and wellbeing at work survey shows the main causes of employee stress include:

- Workloads/volume of work.
- Management style.
- New work-related demands or challenges due to homeworking as a result of COVID-19.
- Non-work factors - relationship or family issues.
- COVID-related anxiety, for example fear of contagion in the workplace/commute.
- Non-work factors – personal illness or health issues.

- Poor work-life balance due to homeworking as a result of COVID-19.
- Relationships at work.

Stress in the time of coronavirus

The COVID-19 pandemic raises serious concerns about people's mental, as well as physical, health. The fear and uncertainty about the pandemic can be exacerbated by work-related pressures on people. Many people have been suddenly shifted to new ways of working, such as full-time homeworking, that can increase demands but decrease the level of control people feel they have: this can be a recipe for increased stress. Our 2021 Health and wellbeing at work survey findings clearly show the impact of new stressors on people because of the pandemic. These concerns are a severe test of people's resilience, and employers need to be aware of the personal, as well as work, pressures on people.

Employers should ensure they have an effective framework in place to detect signs of distress and/or stress and support people's mental health. They need to ensure line managers in particular have the knowledge and confidence to spot the early warning of signs of stress, such as changes in behaviour and/or performance levels. They need to have sensitive conversations with individuals and signpost to help where needed. All employees should be encouraged to have a good self-care routine including a healthy approach to diet, relaxation and sleep which can help to reduce stress levels.

Our guide Coronavirus (COVID-19): Mental health support for employees provides advice for employers. CIPD members can also use our Wellbeing helpline and resources. There's more on what employers should be doing in our Responding to the coronavirus hub.

Signs of stress

The first signs that indicate employees may be suffering from excessive pressure or stress are changes in behaviour or performance. The kinds of change that may occur are listed below, but the important point to remember is being alert to any uncharacteristic behaviour in employees.

Work performance

- Declining/inconsistent performance.
- Uncharacteristic errors.
- Loss of motivation/commitment.
- Lapses in memory.

- Increased time at work.
- Lack of holiday planning/usage.

Conflict and emotional signs

- Crying.
- Arguments.
- Undue sensitivity.
- Irritability/moodiness.
- Over-reaction to problems.
- Personality clashes.

Withdrawal

- Arriving late to work.
- Leaving early.
- Absenteeism.
- Reduced social contacts.

Aggressive behaviour

- Malicious gossip.
- Criticism of others.
- Bullying or harassment.
- Temper outbursts.

Other behaviours

- Difficulty relaxing.
- Increased consumption of alcohol.
- Increased smoking.
- Lack of interest in appearance/hygiene.
- Accidents at home or work.

Physical signs

- Nervous stumbling speech.
- Sweating.
- Tiredness/lethargy.
- Upset stomach/flatulence.
- Tension headaches.

CIPD

- Rapid weight gain or loss.

Dealing with stress at work

Ideally employers should approach stress management proactively, focusing on prevention and early intervention, and not just responding when a problem becomes significant or when someone goes on sick leave.

Developing an organisational framework

The Mental Health at Work Commitment is a simple framework for organisations to implement. Based on the Thriving at work review, it has six standards which provide a roadmap to achieving better mental health outcomes for employees:

- Prioritise mental health in the workplace by developing and delivering a systematic programme of activity.
- Proactively ensure work design and organisational culture drive positive mental health outcomes.
- Promote an open culture around mental health.
- Increase organisational confidence and capability
- Provide mental health tools and support.
- Increase transparency and accountability through internal and external reporting.

The UK Health and Safety Executive (HSE)'s Management Standards provide guidance for employers on how to identify and manage the causes of work-related stress. The HSE lists six main areas of work design which can affect stress levels, which need to be managed properly:

- **Demands**: for example, workload and the working environment.
- **Control**: for example. how much say someone has over their job.
- **Support**: for example, level of supervision and resources available to do the job.
- **Relationships**: for example. promoting positive working to help prevent conflict.
- **Role**: for example, making sure people understand their role and how it fits in the organisation.
- **Change**: for example, how organisational change is managed and communicated.

There are several approaches organisations can take to address stress at work as part of a holistic framework. Our 2021 Health and wellbeing at work survey report identifies the most common methods used to identify and reduce stress in the workplace:

- Employee assistance programme.

- Staff surveys and/or focus groups to identify causes.
- Flexible working options/improved work–life balance.
- Risk assessments/stress audits.
- Training aimed at building personal resilience (such as coping techniques, mindfulness).
- Training for line managers to manage stress.
- Involvement of occupational health specialists.
- Written stress policy/guidance.
- Stress management training for the whole workforce.

Prevention

Organisations should focus their efforts on identifying the main risks of stress to people and implementing measures to reduce or eradicate them.

To help prevent workplace stress:

- Carry out a stress risk assessment, and then allocate resources to reduce or eliminate the sources of stress.
- Give people adequate training and support to do their jobs well.
- Increase support for staff during periods of change and uncertainty.
- Train line managers to identify potential causes of stress in their teams and manage people, and workloads, effectively.
- Increase support for staff during periods of change and uncertainty, particularly important during the ongoing uncertainty caused by the pandemic.

Early intervention

Spotting and addressing early signs of an issue can prevent it escalating. If employees raise an issue and managers are confident and capable of taking action, then early intervention is preferable. Although line managers should hopefully be able to spot the early signs of stress and mental health issues in their team members, employers should ensure there is someone who takes responsibility for line manages' mental health and wellbeing too as this can be overlooked.

The HSE has produced the Talking Toolkit to help managers start a conversation with their employees in identifying stressors (risks) to help manage and prevent work-related stress.

Employers often invest in:

- Developing the people management skills and confidence of managers so they can

have sensitive conversations with staff.
- Developing a supportive work culture to encourage staff to discuss and seek support when experiencing stress.
- Providing, and signposting to, sources of support, for example a counselling service, employee assistance programme and charities.

The role of line managers

Line managers have a crucial role to play in preventing and dealing with workplace stress. While employers increasingly expect line managers to look after people's health and wellbeing, often employers don't provide the necessary training and support. For example, our 2021 Health and wellbeing at work survey report found that 61% of organisations train managers to manage stress.

A line manager is in the best place to understand the demands on a team member, as well as their personal needs and circumstances; they are therefore in a unique position to identify and deal with potential triggers for stress. They are also very likely to be the first port of call if a team member is feeling stressed and needs support. Our tips to support managers to minimise stress in their teams outlines six simple steps:

- Get to know your team better.
- Lead by example to promote healthy working habits.
- Review workloads, duties and responsibilities.
- Reflect on your management style.
- Discourage 'presenteeism' in your team.
- Manage the mental health of your team while remote working.

Our practical line manager support materials are built on research showing the behaviours managers need to exhibit to engage staff and promote positive wellbeing. They will help managers to explore and develop their own management behaviours.

Useful contacts and further reading

Contacts

Acas - Dealing with stress at work

Health and Safety Executive (HSE) - work-related stress

GOV.UK - Employing disabled people and people with health conditions

GOV.UK - Expenses and benefits: counselling for employees

International Stress Management Association

The British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy

Books and reports

BARNETT, D. (2019) *Preventing & defending employee stress claims*. (Employment Law Library 3). London: Nielsen.

CLARIDGE, B. and COOPER, C. (2014) *Stress in the spotlight: managing and coping with stress in the workplace*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

COOPER, C. and HESKETH, I. (2019) *Wellbeing at work: how to design, implement and evaluate an effective strategy.* London: CIPD and Kogan Page.

HARVARD BUSINESS REVIEW. (2014) *HBR guide to managing stress at work: renew your energy, lighten the load, strike a better balance*. Boston, MA: Harvard Business Review Press.

ROBERTSON, I.T. and COOPER, C.L. (2008) *Stress*. CIPD toolkit. London: Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development.

Visit the CIPD and Kogan Page Bookshop to see all our priced publications currently in print.

Journal articles

CLARK, P. (2019) It's time to rethink stress management. *People Management* (online). 23 August.

KAPADI, H. (2018) What employers can do to minimise stress at work. *People Management* (online). 15 August

MACKIE, J. (2018) Can stress be a disability? *People Management* (online). 10 April.

MAKOFF-CLARK, A. (2018) Work-related stress jumps by a quarter to reach 'epidemic' levels. *People Management* (online). 1 November.

CIPD members can use our online journals to find articles from over 300 journal titles relevant to HR.

Members and *People Management* subscribers can see articles on the *People*

Management website.

This factsheet was last updated by Rachel Suff.